

## The dishonest Steward

*A Sermon on Luke 16.1-13 preached by Janet Bird on 22<sup>nd</sup> September 2019*

When you first read this morning's gospel, you might be forgiven for thinking that the message which Jesus is giving us is that, as long as you can get away with it, it is OK to be dishonest if it gets you out of a difficult spot. The rich man accuses his manager of squandering his property, presumably by not taking the proper steps to make money for his boss. Afraid of losing his job the manager decides to cut the debts of some of the people who owe his master money so that they will look more favourably on him when he loses his job and will invite him into their houses

Even more surprising is the reaction of his master who instead of getting angry actually praises him.

As we know from other Bible passages Jesus rarely seemed to be in favour of the rich. The assumption always seems to be that people only get rich at other people's expense.



So the fact that the story begins "There was a Rich Man" rather than "there was a Man" seems to be making a judgement against the master's integrity. Jews were forbidden to lend money and charge interest but it seems likely that they got round this by lending goods and asking for extra to be paid back. By cutting the debts to the Masters debtors it is possible that the steward was simply taking off what might have been seen as interest on the food that had been loaned. Perhaps there was a higher rate of interest on oil -50% while there was only 20% interest on wheat. If this was the case then the master couldn't have punished the

servant without showing up his own shady dealings.

This seems to be reasonably easy to understand as a story but we know that when Jesus spoke in parables there was far more to the story and its actual meaning than might first seem to be the case. So should we then think of the master as God and the steward as Israel? The people of Israel were God's chosen people, responsible for caring for His creation, responsible stewards of the world following His will.

However as we can see from the stories in the Old Testament and from Jesus' teaching about the Pharisees the people Israel had failed to keep their covenant with God.

We know that Jesus often criticised the Pharisees for trying to make Israel appear more holy by tightening all the religious laws, but this just excluded all the people that Jesus was reaching out to; those who were marginalised or outside of society.

Jesus message here is actually really radical and goes against all the teachings of the Pharisees. Israel has reached a time of crisis and so what Jesus seems to be saying is that they should make friends as and where they can, turning around difficult situations so that they can eventually be used for good. We do have to remember that Israel was occupied by Roman troops at this time so life was far from easy. People needed to learn from others how to survive when the going got tough.

Jesus is holding up the manager as a good example of one of the children of his age, those who are having to deal with life as it is happening in Israel at this time and who are acting more shrewdly than the disciples who he calls the children of light. Instead of simply being a victim of circumstance, he transforms a bad situation into one that benefits him and others. By reducing other people's debts, he creates a new set of relationships based not only on financial

aspects but also on the reciprocal relationships of friends- if I help you now then hopefully you will help me in the future.

We have to be careful how we interpret this passage because it may seem to imply that wealth can be used to buy our way into Heaven, but this really isn't what Jesus is saying. Instead he is warning them against hoarding money or land for its own sake. Instead they should use it to make friends and to provide alternative homes where people would be safe. This is not to say that we should only do things for the benefits that they will bring. Rather it is encouraging the disciples to look outside the box and think about problems which may occur in future. They need to be prepared as indeed we all need to be prepared.

This passage seems to very fitting for the Church today. If the church is to grow, or in some places even to survive we must look at new ways of doing things. We must look more closely at the Gospel message and see what Jesus was really saying. Over the years much of what we accept as church law has not come from Jesus but has come from man's interpretation of the Gospel or decisions that were made by the early Christians, sometimes for their own advancement.

When God comes into our lives the old order is overturned. We change our priorities and put our love for God above all else, as well as putting the needs of others before our own.

The passage ends with teaching about stewardship and again this has great bearing on our life today. *"Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much."* We can't pick and choose what we think is important. We need to be honest in all our dealings no matter how large or small. A friend was telling me about the amount of stationary that goes missing from her company because people think it is OK to just take home some pencils or post it notes or envelopes or whatever for their own use on the assumption that nobody will miss them. If a number of people

however do this it soon becomes obvious that something is going on. Because these things are small they can't be seen to be taking them which presumably is why they wouldn't dream of taking a laptop or an office chair- but theft is still theft.

Harking back to the manager the passage tells us: *If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? <sup>12</sup>And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own?*

We all know that money is often at the root of so many problems. Families fall out all the time because of money – especially when people perceive unfairness in an inheritance or lack of opportunity for one over another. In business when might a gift actually be a bribe? Is it right to use other people's money to make money for yourself? Difficult, as the banks seem to be doing that all the time!

However the main message for me comes in the lines:

*"No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth."*

If we slavishly do all that we can to make as much money as we can to the exclusion of all else our lives become shallow and we all know of people who have loads of money but are desperately unhappy or unfulfilled. People who turn away from God because they don't feel that they need Him or who don't want to think about following the teaching of Christ.

Equally we know of rich philanthropists who use their money wisely to serve the needs of those who are less fortunate, showing their love for God and for their fellow human beings.

We cannot buy our way into God's heavenly kingdom no matter how much money we may have or how many good deeds we may do. We can only be saved by God's grace, but loving God leads us to love our neighbours and want to use our time, talents and money in the service of Christ and of those who need our help.